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SUBJECT: MALIAN ARMY RUNS INTO BAHANGA, AND LOSES, AGAIN

REF: BAMAKO 00256

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) On March 20 a convoy of Malian military vehicles clashed with Ibrahim Bahanga's forces on the road between Bourghessa and Tinzawaten. There is some question over whether the Malian military convoy was ambushed or had actively sought confrontation with Bahanga's forces. Our Tuareg contacts have noted that Elladi ag Alla, who was leading a Tuareg delegation that met with Bahanga, allegedly warned the convoy not to proceed because Bahanga's men were positioned along the road ahead.

2.(C) Radio France has reported that several Malian soldiers were killed and wounded. Initial reports from Embassy sources indicate that Bahanga's group captured or destroyed as many as 8 Malian military vehicles plus a military truck loaded with ammunition. Bahanga may have captured as many as 30 Malian soldiers.

3.(C) Bahanga released the last contingent of hostages taken in August 2007 less than two weeks ago following an intervention, and presumed pay off, by Alliance for Democracy and Change (ADC) leader Iyad ag Ghali and an emissary dispatched by Libyan leader Mouammar Qadhafi (reftel).

4.(C) The March 20 confrontation occurred on the road between Bourghessa and Tinzawaten. On March 13 the Malian army commander in Kidal, Lt. Col. Didier Dacko, was seriously wounded when his vehicle hit a land mine along the same road. Dacko was subsequently evacuated from Kidal to Bamako with U.S. military assistance.

5.(C) Bahanga's Paris based father-in-law, Hama ag Sid'Ahmed has been threatening renewed hostilities for the past week. While Sid'Ahmed styles himself as the spokesman for the Northern Mali Tuareg Alliance for Change (ATNMC), his influence over Bahanga appears slim and many of Sid'Ahmed's letters are likely drafted without Bahanga's approval or knowledge. In a March 10 letter sent to various diplomatic missions, Sid'Ahmed demanded the application of the Algiers Accords and the withdrawal of Malian troops from the region of Kidal. He warned that continued refusals to meet these demands would result in serious, but unspecified, consequences. On March 15 Sid'Ahmed released a second statement claiming that Lt. Col. Dacko had been wounded during an attack on Bahanga's positions, and threatened further military action if the Malian government did not take concrete steps toward implementing the Algiers Accords within the next week.

6.(C) Comment: Minister of Defense Natie Pleah briefly appeared on Malian television the evening of March 20 to deliver a statement that attributed Malian military casualties in Tinzawaten to a land mine accident. The Minister said three Malian soldiers had been killed. This likely indicates that real casualties are higher. An official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 21 told the Embassy that Mali had not released an official statement on whether any soldiers had been captured by Bahanga. Whether this most recent action is follow-through on expressed threats by the ATNMC, a Malian military offensive gone awry, or indulgence by a greedy Bahanga to take more hostages now that the practice has been proved remunerative, the end result of deteriorating security in Mali's northeastern corner is disheartening. We understand that the Government of Mali is sending further troop reinforcements into the area, which, given the Malian military's most recent performance, does not necessarily leave us more hopeful.

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